

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S HEALTH THROUGH A COMPREHENSIVE NUTRITION APPROACH

An Evaluation of Nutrition Education in SHAPE California

Executive Summary



A Report for

**Nutrition Programs, Education, and Training Unit
Nutrition Services Division
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**Prepared by
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Executive Summary

In Year 3, the evaluation of SHAPE (Shaping Health As Partners In Education) California addressed the expansion of the case studies initially reported in Years 1 and 2. Qualitative data for the case studies was drawn primarily from observations and interviews conducted during site visits to the 12 Case Study districts in October-November 2000 by members of the evaluation team. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with the Regional Nutrition Education Specialists (RNES's) working with these districts during the summer of 1999, as well as interviews with the Child Nutrition Partner at periodic intervals throughout the year. Documentation of the SHAPE California program from each district also contributed to the expanded case studies.

The evaluation design and subsequent sampling of districts for inclusion into the Case Study Component of the overall evaluation categorized districts as to whether they had received a Model Nutrition Education (MNE) grant, had access to the services of a Regional Nutrition Education Specialist (RNES), had both, or had neither. It was hypothesized that districts with both an MNE grant and an RNES would be more successful in promoting nutrition education within the district, while those with neither would be least successful.

In addition to the case studies, the Year 3 evaluation summarized the annual Work Plans and Self-Assessments requested of all SHAPE grantees, as well as the final reports from the Model Nutrition Education grantees.

Key Findings

The evaluation investigated six aspects of SHAPE California. The key findings from the case study analysis are summarized below according to these SHAPE California aspects.

The value placed on nutrition education

- By Year 3, nutrition education was on the rise as a priority in several of the Case Study districts. Consistent with the Year 2 findings, those districts with both a Model Nutrition Education grant and the services of an RNES were more likely to report that nutrition education was a greater priority than a year earlier, compared to the other districts. The services of an RNES also appear to have contributed to an increased importance of nutrition education within the district.
- The relentless demand for higher test scores led to an increased emphasis on math and language arts instruction in almost every district, slowing the rate at which nutrition

education as a priority was growing. In those districts that saw an increase in nutrition education as a priority, the change appears to have come about because of the steady, long-term presence of a clear and persuasive voice speaking on behalf of nutrition education in the district and the forging of partnerships that made it possible.

- The presence of a Model Nutrition Education grant has a positive impact on the overall promotion of nutrition education in the district. Of the five functioning MNE grantees in the Case Study evaluation component, all improved their classroom nutrition education activities.

Nutrition education in the classroom

- By Year 3, three-quarters of the 12 Case Study districts had maintained previous positive progress or appear to have made strides at creating sustained nutrition education in the classroom. In this domain, the impact of both the Model Nutrition Education grants and the services of the RNES's can be seen. The Model Nutrition Education grants provided funds that supported the development and purchase of new curricula, as well as the provision of equipment such as cooking carts that allow teachers to integrate cooking and nutrition into their ongoing class activities. The RNES's provided or encouraged teacher training, encouraged some districts to apply successfully for SHAPE mini-grants which led to the purchase of additional curriculum materials, and focused MNE grantees on the development of the nutrition education.

Nutrition education in the cafeteria

- There was less change within the domain of creating nutrition education in the cafeteria between Years 1 and 2, and no apparent pattern was seen among the four groups of Case Study districts. In part, this may have been because the level of nutrition education in the cafeteria was already fairly high at the time of the Year 1 site visit. In Year 3, four districts appear to have strengthened their cafeteria-based nutrition education programs.
- Some modest changes in the school nutrition environment were observed during the site visits to the Case Study districts, including an increase in the number of school cafeterias that label the nutritional content of the foods offered, an increase in the number of nutrition messages printed on school lunch menus, and an increase in the number of healthy food choices in high school campus vending machines. However, the number of instances in which pro-active marketing of healthy foods was observed declined across the three-year study period.

Partnership between child nutrition and the classroom

- There was a fair amount of turnover among the Child Nutrition and Classroom Partners as people changed jobs, went on maternity leave, or became ill. This made

sustaining a strong partnership more challenging. Across the 12 districts, two-thirds of the partnerships stayed the same between Years 2 and 3, but one-third declined.

- Among the five functioning Model Nutrition Education grantees¹, four reported strengthened partnerships in Year 2 and these partnerships generally sustained themselves into Year 3. In part, this may be due to the fact that the MNE funds paid for some of the release time of the Classroom Partner to work on curriculum development.

Nutrition-related policies

- Relatively little progress was made in improving district nutrition policies between Year 1 and Year 2. By Year 3, however, some improvements in nutrition-related policies were becoming visible with three districts reporting new or improved policies. Two of these districts had both an MNE and an RNES; one had an RNES only. Thus, the provision of technical support and funding appears to lead to improved policy-making, but this change takes time to happen.

Staff development

- The presence of a Model Nutrition Education (MNE) grant had a significant impact on the availability of staff development on nutrition education for teachers. Three of the five functioning MNE districts showed strengthened efforts in staff development and these changes were sustained in Year 3.
- The services of an RNES also contributed to improved staff training; five of the six districts served by an RNES strengthened their staff development efforts. Again, this pattern continued into Year 3.

These themes from the Case Study component were borne out in the quantitative analysis of district self-assessments and final program reports. The analysis compared Model Nutrition Education (MNE) districts and other districts that are in the SHAPE network but did not necessarily have current SHAPE funding. The analysis shows some differences in demographics and in areas of program emphasis. MNE districts had more time and activities devoted to building the partnership, a factor that was associated in the Case Study component with more positive program outcomes. MNE districts also had more district nutrition education policies in place, a factor that contributes strongly to the institutionalization of nutrition education in the district.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the evaluation, several recommendations for future nutrition education efforts can be made:

¹ One MNE district dropped out of SHAPE in Year 2.

- Multi-year funding must be available to support nutrition education. In SHAPE California districts with Model Nutrition Education grants, nutrition education increased as a priority over a period of three years. In addition, those districts improved their classroom nutrition education activities.
- Technical assistance from a nutrition education specialist should be available to support effective nutrition education. Case study districts with a Regional Nutrition Education Specialist (RNES) or with a district nutrition education specialist showed increased importance of nutrition education, had more staff development, and were successful in obtaining other nutrition-related grants.
- Funding and technical assistance also contribute to the development of nutrition education policies, but this change takes time to happen. Policies are a major means of sustaining nutrition education as a priority within a district.
- Staff development in nutrition education is needed for teachers and child nutrition staff. Staff development provides information and planning time for ways to integrate nutrition education into the core curriculum and link classroom instruction with cafeteria activities. These are new endeavors for many teachers and for most child nutrition staff. Unfortunately, opportunities for staff development in most California districts have been severely truncated because of budget restrictions. Targeted grant monies and/or a nutrition education specialist make training and technical assistance possible.
- Partnerships between child nutrition and the classroom contribute to the success of nutrition education programs. Strong partnerships are those in which both partners take responsibility for the program and consider it to be a priority. Again, targeted funding provides time for partners to plan and implement activities together. The classroom component of nutrition education is central to the program's success, and districts where the Classroom Partner did not participate fully did not improve.
- Partnerships between child nutrition and the classroom also contribute to the program's sustainability. In districts where the program relied primarily on the child nutrition partner, the program suffered when that partner took leave or burned out.
- Ways for teachers to be committed to and involved in the nutrition education program must be created. Teachers should be involved in initial planning, including the grant-writing process, and classroom partners should be carefully selected for their interest in nutrition, and ability to mobilize other teachers and follow through.
- District and site-level administrators must be actively supportive of the district's nutrition education program for it to be effective. Strong administrative support results in district nutrition education policies, facilitation of grant development, and facilitation of other elements that make for a successful program: staff development, teacher release time, inclusion of nutrition in the curriculum, stronger ownership by teaching staff, and parent and community support.

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